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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 003275

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MASS](#) [PARM](#) [KNNP](#) [PK](#) [CH](#) [IN](#) [NSSP](#) [US](#)

SUBJECT: INDIAN LAWMAKERS MISSING MESSAGE ON US-INDIA

Classified By: Charge Robert O. Blake, Jr., for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

1. (C) Summary: During an Indo-US Parliamentary Forum (IUPF) gathering on April 27, Indian lawmakers were upbeat about US-India relations, but were surprisingly uninformed about key details of the initiatives underway to make the strategic partnership a reality. Suggesting that the positive impact of Dr. Rice's March 16 visit had been overshadowed by the "watershed" visits of President Musharraf and Chinese PM Wen, several went so far as to suggest that the India-China agreement on border issues was of greater long-range strategic import than the US initiatives. They also insisted -- despite recent Administration statements -- that a perception of "hyphenation" continues to surround the popular Indian view of U.S. policy towards New Delhi and Islamabad. The MPs also did not understand the extent, scope and long-range impact of the proposed F-16/F-18 offer. The group urged that more be done to demonstrate the US-India transformation to the broad Indian public. The Mission will ramp up its outreach to MPs beyond the IUPF members to counter these misperceptions and explain the March 25 initiatives. End Summary.

2. (C) Opening the meeting with IUPF member MPs, the Charge highlighted the new peak in US-India relations following Dr. Rice's March 16 visit to New Delhi. Emphasizing the significance of the March 25 South Asia Initiative in terms of strategic, civil nuclear, civil space, and military cooperation, the Charge sought feedback from the MPs regarding how well this message had been received and understood in the Parliament and more broadly in India.

3. (C) During the 2 hour freewheeling discussion that followed, the MPs from across the political spectrum were unanimous in the view that while they and other IUPF members were much more informed about the current state of US-India relations and recognized and appreciated the significant transformation that has taken place in the last several years, this was not the case for other MPs and the Indian public at large.

4. (C) The MPs observed a tendency among their Parliamentarian colleagues and the broader Indian public to see progress on India-China, primarily as evidenced by the recent progress achieved on Sikkim and the border principles agreement during the Wen visit, as the most significant foreign policy achievement in recent months. As one MP noted, Wen "captured the popular imagination" while the US message remains "flat". Maintaining that the importance of the USG proposal to co-produce F-16/F-18s with India had also been lost on the Parliament and the Indian public because the "reciprocal" US offer of F-16s to Pakistan, the MPs observed that the extensive benefits contained in the US offer were widely unrecognized and the offer was widely seen as just a "30 year old airframe." The MPs complained about a lingering sense of "hyphenation" in the US approach to India and Pakistan, and underlined that the March 25 initiatives would have gotten a much more favorable response if they had not coincided with the Pakistan F-16 announcement. "The government and strategic analysts are on your side", one MP remarked, "but most Indians remain highly skeptical".

5. (C) The Charge, PolCouns and DATT responded by explaining in considerable detail the ambitious nature of the F-16/F-18 proposal and the other elements of the US South Asia Initiative. The MPs argued that the Mission needed to do more to demonstrate to other MPs and to the broader Indian public the full extent of the transformation that has taken place with bilateral relations. "You (the US) need to drive home the message that Washington aims for an exclusive relationship with India," one Congress MP advised.

6. (C) The Ambassador and other Mission elements already have conducted extensive outreach to the media and think tanks, many of whom have published favorable op-eds. Nonetheless, we need to do much more. In addition to increasing efforts to reach out to other lawmakers, mission intends to engage major US corporations, including defense contractors, to enlist their assistance in getting the message out regarding the new US-India agenda and the opportunity reflected in the March 25 initiatives.

7. (C) IUPF Participants:
Rajiv Shukla, Convenor, Rajya Sabha (Congress)
Sachin Pilot, Lok Sabha (Congress)
Robert Kharshiing, Rajya Sabha (Nationalist Congress Party)

Manvendra Singh, Lok Sabha (BJP)
Ajay Maken, Lok Sabha (Congress)
Madhu Goud Yaskhi, Lok Sabha (Congress)
BJ Panda, Rajya Sabha (Ciju Janata Dal)
Milind Deora, Lok Sabha (Congress)
Ramesh Chandran, Executive Director, IUPF
BLAKE